



Office of the Mayor

NEWS RELEASE

March 29, 2007
2 p.m.

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Parents turn to city's Camp Fair to fill child care gap

As summer approached the year before Amy Dowd's twin sons were to enter first grade, she and her husband, Matt, realized they needed to find summer child-care options for their boys.

Matt, who had been at home with the boys previous summers while studying at the University of Notre Dame, returned full time to the workforce. And sending the boys to the pre-school provider the family used previously was cost-prohibitive.

"We realized we've got to figure out something for the boys to do this summer," said Dowd, a financial representative at Northwestern Mutual. So three years ago, the Dowds visited the South Bend Parks and Recreation Department's annual O'Brien Summer Camp Fair.

"We were amazed at how many different groups were there. It really opened our eyes – not only for what the South Bend Parks and Recreation has to offer, but also for whatever else was out there," said Dowd, who was able to place her sons, Benjamin and Michael, in a variety of daylong camps throughout the summer. "Almost every single week they had something different to do for their camps. ... It's nice to have so much variety."

The Dowds and hundreds of parents will connect with more than 30 camps at the 6th annual O'Brien Summer Camp Fair from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday at the O'Brien Recreation Center, 321 E. Walter St. For working parents, the free Camp Fair provides "one-stop shopping" for them to assemble a complex puzzle of summertime child care. In addition, families can:

- Register to win a free week at the camp of their choice and a summer camp survival kit.
- Attend one of four informational sessions presented by the American Camping

Association every half hour beginning at 9:30 a.m.

Unlike a generation ago when camps existed solely to enrich the lives of participating children, parents today are turning to summer resident and day camps to provide child-care services essential to households where both parents are working. Forever gone is the romantic notion of an idyllic summer vacation for children as they play in neighborhood backyards under mom's watchful eye.

"That's how it was when I was growing up. ... My mom was a stay-at-home mom. I was always home during the summer," said Dowd, who has no relatives living in the area.
"With our changing times, it doesn't really work to have one parent at home."

Relatives still provide care for most families. But in an increasingly mobile society, working parents turn to city-sponsored programs and other summer camps for child-care assistance.

Nearly one-third (30 percent) of school age-children are in at least one summer child-care arrangement that can be defined as an organized program, according to a study by the Urban Institute. (The study, "What Happens When the School Year is Over: The Use and Costs of Child Care for School-Age Children During the Summer Months," is available online at: www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310497_OP58.pdf)

Nearly 6.2 million kids went to camp last summer, both day and overnight, up from fewer than 5 million in 2001, according to the National Camp Association. Demand for spaces has increased to the point where December is now designated as "National Sign Up for Summer Camp month."

"When school is not in session, child-care patterns and the costs of care change for working families. When the school year ends, these families face new and difficult decisions about how to care for their school-age children while they work," the study said. "Arranging child care during the summer is particularly challenging for working parents. There is a heavy reliance on summer programs that are not available during the school year."

Families "are stringing together a series of arrangements – one- or two-week camps, visits to relatives, and vacations from work" to balance the demands of work and home life when school is out. The O'Brien Summer Camp Fair helps parents make those connections. "I would not have known where else to look," Dowd said.

For the Dowds, the variety is a benefit. In the past, the boys have spent a week at their church's vacation Bible school, a week with St. Joseph County Parks' program at St. Pat's Park as well as turning to city-run programs for three weeks at the Newman Recreation Center and a week each at Camp Awareness and Zoo Camp at Potawatomi Zoo.

"Camp Awareness usually is the absolute favorite," said Dowd, who marvels at the opportunities for her sons. "At Camp Awareness, they've been exposed to archery. That wasn't something I was exposed to till high school."

The opportunities for enriching experiences at camps is one reason why, among working

families with school-age children, 41 percent pay for child care during the summer, according to the Urban Institute study. In 1997, working families with children under age 13 spent 9 percent of their monthly earnings on child care during the summer months, according to the Urban Institute.

“Camp Awareness is a great price for everything you get there,” said Dowd, who, like many working parents, prefers daylong options. “Any time when [programs] are going 8 to 5, those are so much more beneficial to parents.”

With potential cuts in city services from the looming threat of the statewide property tax “Circuit Breaker,” programs for youth face competition from police, fire and other city services in light of a 25 percent reduction in revenue.

“I hadn’t thought about how it could even effect the services the city provides like this,” Dowd said. “As parents with the changing of these times, these are the things that need to be addressed by the city as well.”